

The Red Riding Hood Papers



SHANAN BALLAM

The Red Riding Hood Papers

poems by

Shanan Ballam

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The Red Riding Hood Papers

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for my sisters

Both Sides of the Window

The story is a window, and light slides
its eyes through the glass. Little prickles
of time, the squeak of a finger, smudging
its oily print. Outside, the sky darkens
like a bruise. The blue fragrance of spring
snow. Red Riding Hood is on both sides
of the window. Outside, the sky hums
a golden light. The night will be unbearably
cold. If the story goes on forever, it will always
end. Wolf, ulfe, lupine, lupus: the slippery
animal of time. Wolf stretches long
and harmless in a patch of sun, then winds
himself in a cocoon of glass. He waits
for the right moment to shatter out and fly.
Wolf will always be waiting, the girl always
watching, maybe inside, maybe outside, in the sky.
Smudge of the seasons on windows,
smudge of fingerprints, halo of breath on glass.
Glass holds nothing but itself.
The window watches me; the seasons sprout
buds and wings as Wolf swirls over the hills.

A New Beginning

The mountain trail winds steeply,
but I'll make the peak by afternoon.
On the ridge above, a woman hobbles,
rickety on a walking stick. I trudge

toward the old woman, her blue country
dress faded and dusty, her skin sick gray
under a neat bonnet. With yellow-brown
eyes she sizes me up, sighs, sinks

to sit on a log and gaze at my face.
My granddaughter's late again, she says.
She stops to play in the flowers
and talk to the wolf. This time I'm going
for the medicine myself, though it's not part
of the story. She narrows her eyes.
And neither are you.

A chill wind erupts, rakes through my hair.
Out of the air the old woman produces
a red cape. *If you wear this and bring me*
medicine for my nerves, it's yours.

I don't answer. She watches me.
Then she begins to sob, rubs the small
of her back, then hauls herself up
for the long walk down.

I touch her arm and nod, slide
the cape over my body,
tell her she looks like my grandma.
Her yellow eyes brighten in a tight little smile.
I always do, my dear.

The Porcupine

I. Below Zero

Frozen between the white thighs
of winter, frozen in the dead-tree

and snow-bound silence, I lingered
like lace, always on the edge

of something. Of course he had a gun.
Little cataracts of blue ice in the stream gully,

below zero, and, oh, the lacy edges shimmered,
shattered under my numb boot-toe—

always the brave thrust of small water,
silver bubbles pressing under

the skin of the ice. The dogs' tired huff
as they settled into imprints

of their own black bodies.
Frozen, lingering on the edge

of the stream, I wrote a new story
of myself, one packed with animals,

magic, and a little girl in hot-pink snowpants
who runs away from home hauling only

a backpack filled with calico cats.
She ate only snow. She made grand plans
to save the dogs at midnight under brittle stars.

II. Late Winter

Of course he had a gun. I lingered,
always on the edge of something, like lace.
Guns keep the house safe.

When a porcupine lumbered up to eat
the no-name dog food, the dogs sprang,
pink mouths open. Up the canyon, he taught

me how to shoot the gun, how to aim
with breathless precision. Revision:
the girl doesn't rescue dogs or devise

a plan that includes lighting massive fires.
She feeds the dogs canned soup and corn cobs,
scrambled eggs when they're starving,

feeds them sticks of butter, even.
Makes sure to pour hot water
into their frozen water bowls.

The girl cuts off all her hair and practices
sitting still, blank as ice.

III. Spring Breaking

I clamped the big dog's head between my legs,
so big, his name was Saturn. I straddled
his wide shoulders while Dad yanked quills
from his black, bloody nose, his soft pink mouth.

Strangled yelp and a red snarl.
Dad's brown boot thudded into Saturn's ribs,
clipped my heel hard, but I didn't cry.
Of course there was a hunt.

Just over the stream, its winter skin cracking
opaque green, the pale scent of stone was rising.
Bluebells in the marsh beyond thrust through
heavy, gray patches of snow.

Dad took the gun, crossed the water
in one huge step. Crackling whispers
in the scrub oak, in the aspen just beginning
to bud, brilliant green. Ten shots. Then I lost

count. Later I saw all the oozing, purple holes
in its belly, the porcupine's sweet brown face,
and the quills laid down in their brown-cream patterns.
The stream gushed. Mud sucked on my boots.

Red splotches in the dirty snow.
Everything was frozen, or thriving.
I was one breath away.

Red Riding Hood's Basket

His handle hooked in the crook of her arm,
the basket nodded on her hip, remembered
that once, long ago, he was a wonderful willow,
and every spring his branches thrilled

with the chirps of red-winged blackbirds.
Back then, he had wrists, and his fingers
dangled delicate leaves as he breathed.
Back then, he could dream all winter,

and when he woke in the spring he was stronger.
Deep in the earth he felt his roots charging.
But one day in summer his whole body shuddered.
All the leaves curled thirsty, the branches gasping.

When he woke up, he was only a mouth,
a plain woven basket for women to stuff
with cake and wine and warm soft bread.
He was a mouth, but he had no tongue.

The basket nodded on her hip as they walked
through tall trees and sharp thickets.
He drowsed till he heard a honeyed growl.
Then he felt her breath quicken.

He was heavy with the sloshing jar
of wine. Dizzy on her hip, his mind wild
with what might happen next, he tried
to scream *run!* But he had no tongue.

Red Riding Hood in the Forest

I saw him curling, animal, around
every bend, so I slunk and pressed my robes
to rocks damp with mosses, wishing,
oh wishing to peel off my skin!

Animal, he wants me around every bend.
Once I gazed at him, my eyes dark and damp.
I unlatched my cloak, pressed to him
whole. At first he curled gentle,

leaned me, bent me, then his teeth
clenched my throat. I tasted gray
snow. Then he curled, sucked me,
bent and cracked my spine. I sunk into a mind

of damp and dark mosses. I changed my path.
I burned my robe, but still around every bend
I see him curling. So I've stopped washing
my hair, don't smear color on my lips,

learned to walk stiff with no swing in my
hips. I clench my cloak tight, cover
my dark, secret places. I can't find
a zipper to zip up this skin.

Waiting for the Judge to Sign the Protective Order

Because one sister is a seal,
she can scooch up the snow
on her belly, nosing
her bloody tennis ball.

I pop the ball into my pocket.
The other sister's paralyzed, skinny
little blades for arms.

She gets so tired.

I grab her under the armpits,
soldier-style, and haul
her, inch by inch, up the icy hill.
At the top we get on the lift,
but we should have known
a paralyzed girl can't sit
on her own; she slides
off the seat in a crumpled lump.

Seal doesn't want her to feel terrible,
doesn't want to descend the miles
without her, so she slides off, too.

It seems best just to ski
down. Oh, and it's lovely—spring
smooches through the snow, emerald
snatches of grass. I leave
the pink bulk of my parka.

The go-jerk-stop of ice then
green, and my sister blading her way
down on those arms. If we see him, she can
slide right through his belly. I can't
do anything, but Seal—don't seals eat raw
flesh? The whole dirty city is below
us, spread out, and it's so quiet up here.

I lift my paralyzed sister onto my back, lean
low so we don't tip, and Seal flops by my side.
The bloody ball bulges my hip.
My sister is heavy, but we're going.
We'll never do this vacation again.

Red Riding Hood's Wish

I'm no angel. I'm not dead.
I live inside a little nest of words
and I live inside your head,
my story living and living:
the day Wolf swallowed me whole.

I'm a lesson. I'm the silly girl
who didn't listen to her mother,
talked to a stranger and got
her grandmother eaten.

Wolf swallowed us both
and our twin bodies locked fast
in the wet, black grave.

Sometimes we stay this way
forever, rock together in the dark.

Sometimes a woodsman hears
me scream and comes racing
to see the bulge of our limbs
in Wolf's sleeping body.

He slits Wolf's skin with scissors.
We pop into the air, purple-faced,
gulping, then fill his belly
with cold stones and sew him up.

When it happens this way,
Wolf drowns in the well every time.
We laugh and watch his eyes widen
in the tomb of water.

But listen: just once I want to be the girl
who doesn't have to die.
And I don't want to be saved.
I don't want to watch Wolf
drown, don't want to sew
his hide into a rug or a coat.

I don't want to tote his head
on a stick through town.

I don't want to watch little girls read my story
and shake their heads as if they know,
as if I'm the only one who travels forever
through this brutal world alone.

Still Waiting for the Judge to Sign the Protective Order

When I pass out later, my sister's voice
goes with me, and I take us all
to a hotel in the woods.

I wear a black gown and I've curled
my hair. No, this isn't a hotel—
this is a hospital! And the elevator
keeps missing our floor.

My sisters are going swimming.

My mother's hair is golden, and she's very calm.
She holds a phone in her hand,
but I know it's really a secret kind

of gun. My sister's ex won't know
to look for us here. There's a party
on the top floor, and I've witnessed
a murder. Some poor woman's been shot.

I've cut off my hair, played dolls
with a child named Stella. All this on the way
to the rich people's party on the top floor.

I did laundry, too. So much to do!

Who was that woman I saw shot? Or did she

fall? I'm an unreliable witness.

What if I break down on the stand?

I saw his face but it was so fast.

The elevator still won't stop, so we take the stairs
but they lead every-which-way
like an Escher piece and every door
that blares a green exit light
is another entrance to the stairs.

Grandmother's Bed

All afternoon the bed dreamed it was a door.
It felt the old woman's eye press
and spy through its tiny, exquisite peephole.
It relished the heavy pleasure of being opened, opened.
It thrilled at the feeling of the child passing

over its threshold, that strip of gold
nailed tight in one place.
It stood solid, refused to splinter, stood
sturdy against the dreadful weather
of winds and bitter drifts.

It stood proud, adorned with fragrant
wreathes of evergreen, smiling secretly
when it felt the clean click
of its latch snapping into place.
It didn't flinch when the wicked

or the desperate beat its face,
demanding to get in.
But when the bed woke from the dream
it was only a bed, with its soft belly,
and no way to slam shut

against the fat wolf who wore
the old woman's nightdress.
No way to protect the quilts.
He yanked them open,
slipped inside.

Red Riding Hood to Grandmother

Go ahead, grandmother, slide
your tongue along the salt
of my cheeks, lick
my eyes closed and then take
a little nibble—my earlobe,
my smallest finger. I've brought

a basket of bread we could
eat in two snaps, but let's
forget about that—your tongue
on my throat feels like
a silk scarf. I need to
tell you: I rip
scabs from my skin
and lay them on my tongue.
Don't tell anyone,

but I bathed my cat with my
tongue, slowly and so slowly
I licked her eyelids and the soft,
soft patch of fur right behind
her ear. When she closed
the spring blue of her eyes,
I could run my tongue
across them and taste
the shape of her mind.

Joint Custody

Tonight I slowly spin the ginger root,
telephone pinned between shoulder and ear,
my sister's rich voice in my head.

I strip the paper-sack skin
from the lemony heart. She tells me
her ex is doing it again. No one
to stop him, now that she's left.
The fragrance unfolds to my lips
and I can taste as I grate
the cool ginger core. I mix

the ginger with sherry, add
garlic, the sting of white pepper.
She tells how he used to laugh when
the cats writhed in his hands, how he covered
their mouths until their claws scrambled
in the air. As I fold the gray bodies
of shrimp into the sherry, she reminds
me how he would always
do it to her, pinch her nose in the vice
of one hand, press to seal

her mouth with the other;
the world was almost black.
And now it's my niece. I dip
one shrimp into the slimy
beaten egg—my niece sucks hard
against her father's salty palm—
I smother another body in the ooze—
the cats' green eyes pop wide—I drop
the shrimp into sizzling oil, watch
as each fetal curl blushes coral.
Our fierce breath intertwines, hisses
power in and out of the receiver.

Wolf Remembers the Birth of Red Riding Hood, Circe's Palace

From thick woods men emerged,
wind-sick, sea-blown;
her voice, woven silver, rose
from her house of stone,

lured them, famished men of flesh,
to her home. We wolves, sad pack,
once desperate, tread their path,
each entranced by sensuous magic,

sashes of grief whipping our backs,
our women long lost.

Amber honey, dark wine with a vile pinch,
Circe's potion made us forget, forget.

But as those men emerged
I remembered my story, knew, at once,
my life—it swelled in my skull,
kicked, scraped, wailed, then sprang

from my brain a full-grown woman,
red cape swirling, as Circe drew
her wand, wrenched men into pigs,
though their minds remained unchanged.

Red Riding Hood and Wolf Discuss the Situation

*"You take it for granted that I am in something
I want to get out of"*

—Stella, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Why do you always hurt her!

I only bit her to stop the crying.

Every time, and she's just an old

Bitch. I wish she'd move to the city.
woman! Who's sick! I wish you'd just

Kiss me, poison.

No! Maybe never again!

Come, let me taste your mouth.

You have to promise! Don't hurt her!

I haven't eaten her in two years, darling
And I haven't killed you in three, but

You won't kill me again

I will. I will. I don't want this

Come, let me touch your hair

Don't! Stay away—oh.

Now. Don't you feel better now.

I can't do this anymore.

Oh, but love, you can. You will.

This is ours—all of it.

Our own incredible kingdom.

Crossroads

Twenty-three degrees, and March is turning
a gray-green face back to winter.
Frost bends tall blond weeds
till they kiss their own stalks.
Three-quarter moon licks silver
the black shine of asphalt; a stream
wide as my body ripples, crinkles
in the dark of a shallow gorge.
Somewhere a bird screeches
in the cold air, surrounds my steps
with sound. There, on the corner,
is my house; yellow windows
warm the night, but I want
only the bite of wind
on my lips, the lonely scrape
of snow on my skin. The stream
has a silver voice. No one would ever
know to find me there tonight,
dipping my fingers into the sound,
becoming the disappearance,
like breath or water.

Wolf Feels Something Coming

Something deep as freezing licks
my brain. I can taste its heavy metal, smell
the sweet of fresh-cut wood in rain,
or a broken bone leaking marrow.
Something surges—the dense
fragrance of sucking snows.
Is this my last season, my cold
death soaking in? I hear singing
deep in the woods, and something
in crimson skin glides nearer,
steadily, even in the slice of autumn wind.

Red Riding Hood Opens the Door

There is a house.
Inside the house,
a wolf. Inside the wolf,
an old woman. Inside the old
woman, an empty womb glittering
music: teeth, hair, fists,
bulb of brain blooming intricate.
Inside the wolf inside the woman
there is a deep metal fear
of bodies shattering into
fragments, shimmering
back into syntax.

Meanwhile, the old woman's daughter
packs a basket, dresses
her daughter in a red cape, directs
her into a green-black forest
where there is no god, only a story,
wild roses always breathing soft warnings.
She reaches the house, opens
the door, a dark mouth opens
and she knows again the dazzling pain
of self in all its forms,
our disastrous needs.

The story is so heavy. Inside
a small house, a wolf weeps.
The womb aches.

Safe House

I felt him crunch
snow in December dark,
felt the fry of crosshairs
on my scalp through the tear
in the curtains. I felt myself die
every day they lived
with me that winter.

And though my sister
and the baby had left him,
paranoia squirmed little
roots in my dreams
till they burst

into the pale purple of hyacinth,
the frilled, golden tongue
of iris. My dead
grandmother bloomed.
That winter, she lived inside
my brain like bluebells, like water,
like the little stream
beside her cabin that dripped
its ache, its bone-cracking chill.

I could see little wisps of her face,
the pale strawberry
birthmark on her thigh,
the yards of silvery
thread she spun into roses,
then curtains, gardens spilling
onto the carpet as the sun shone through
because our brains, those delicate
angels, can spread the petals
of their wings, and lift.

Singing in the Dark

*White-crowned sparrows sing
frequently during the dark May nights.*

—National Audubon Society, Field Guide to Birds

At five a.m., I go outside.
The sky stretches its black arc, stars burst
white fire. Out there, in the trees,
sparrow voices tear apart the dark,

unravel me. I remember flinging
my little-girl voice into the loneliness
of the clammy garage,
my stories evolving
into songs that clinked cold against
dark cement walls, arrowed back to bathe
my face in reverberation.

Still, I can't sing well, but I want to sing.
In the empty garage with only the glossy
cat who weaves through my ankles and mews,
excited by the new voice that springs

from my mouth, I press
my diaphragm with an unsteady hand,
guide the deep voice from my guts
because I can be honey, I can be rain,
I can let my voice fly like the sparrow
with no expectations, but some incredible bliss.

Red Riding Hood Shoots Grandma's Gun

She snugs the smooth wood
into her cheekbone, expels
her last wisp of breath.

Left hand cradles
the long barrel.

Now her body is a girl-gun.
Her hands, wood and metal,
her mouth is the barrel,
black, deadly. Her finger,
the trigger. She selects
one leaf in the distance; it stutters
dull to shine, shine to dull—
the same shift you see in the eyes
of a person fresh-dead.

Bright, watery eye of life,
then iced over. She takes
one deep breath, pushes
it out. Steady. Blam! Blam!
Words rip from her mouth
and shred the left cheek
of the leaf. Now it's lovelier,
transformed to lace.

Shanan Ballam earned her B.S. in English from Utah State University, where she also earned a Master's degree in the Theory and Practice of Writing. She earned her MFA in Poetry Writing from The University of Nebraska's low-residency program. One of the poems in this collection, "Red Riding Hood to Grandmother," was nominated by *Indiana Review* for inclusion in *The Best New Poets Anthology 2009*. Her poems have appeared in many literary journals, including *Indiana Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *cream city review*, and *Calyx: A Journal of Art and Literature by Women*. She is a lecturer at Utah State University where she teaches poetry writing and academic writing. She lives in Wellsville, Utah with her husband, two dogs, and three cats. *The Red Riding Hood Papers* is her first chapbook.

The Red Riding Hood Papers draws us into the dark world of Grimm and Kafka. Its woods are full of menace, allure, and metamorphoses, of fang and howl, dread and appetite. Things turn inside out, time goes haywire, heights become depths, prey becomes predator and predator prey. We are cast among the life-or-death struggles at the core of our subconscious life, where "Wolf will always be waiting, the girl always/watching, maybe inside, maybe outside, in the sky." Yet through this darkness runs a strong current of compassion and survival. And thanks to the gifts of this author, the rhythms and music of these poems register as bone-deep as their narratives and archetypes. This has to be one of the year's best chapbooks.

William Trowbridge

In her striking new chapbook, Shanan Ballam intersperses poems that explicitly invoke Red Riding Hood with poems about domestic and sexual abuse, using the fairy tale to remind us of the dreamlike strangeness and violence of our actual, everyday world, both human and natural. Thus, the poems give powerful voice to victimhood, but even more, importantly, through their unexpected word choices and linebreaks, they remind us not only of the hardness of our world but of its remarkable beauty.

Katharine Coles

Shanan Ballam earned her MFA in Poetry Writing from The University of Nebraska's low-residency program. She is a lecturer at Utah State University where she teaches poetry writing and academic writing.



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